



Dignity for dead women:

Media guidelines for reporting domestic violence deaths



These guidelines were written by Janey Starling on behalf of Level Up, 2018.



Level Up is a feminist community.

Our mission is to build a community of feminists who can work together to end sexism in the UK. Our vision is a world where women and nonbinary people can live safely, whether at home, work or in the street.

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Designed by [Hannah Pilbeam](#)

Illustration on page 7 by Tamara-Jade Kaz.

INTRODUCTION

“Every week in the UK, two women are murdered by a partner or ex-partner.”¹

Some of these deaths attract media attention, and journalists are faced with the challenge of covering an issue that is in the public interest, whilst managing an ethical duty towards victims’ families.

In collaboration with journalists, criminologists, domestic violence experts and victims’ families, Level Up has developed these guidelines to support journalists to accurately and sensitively cover fatal domestic abuse.

Before you write about fatal domestic abuse, understand that:

1) When someone has been killed by their partner or ex-partner, this is usually the endpoint to a sustained period of coercive control - not an isolated incident². Including the broader context is a matter of accuracy.

2) Research shows that narratives of romantic “love” in domestic abuse deaths can lead to lighter sentencing in court, even when there has been clear evidence of systemic violence leading to murder³. Studies have also shown that men who demonstrated “love” before, during or after they enacted fatal violence were given more lenient sentences and more sympathy than men who demonstrated an absence of love⁴. This means that articles describing a “jilted lover” or “jealous rage” have a negative impact on justice for victims.

3) Insensitive reporting has lasting traumatic impacts on victims’ families. The children of murdered women will, and do, read all the coverage about their deceased mother - and may be retraumatised by it. Quotes from neighbours giving positive character references are inappropriate.

4) Cultural and religious insensitivity detracts focus from the woman’s life that has been lost. Fatal domestic abuse and honour killings are a global issue - and not specific to a religious viewpoint, unless stated otherwise by a victim’s family. Inaccurate and insensitive reporting fuels discrimination against Muslim communities in the UK.

5) Every article on fatal domestic abuse is an opportunity to help prevent further deaths

“The proposed guidelines are not just desirable, they are crucial. Reporting of these homicides should not only be fair, but should reflect reality because this could help prevent future deaths. These perpetrators invariably share some behavioural patterns which reveal risk. Myths and inaccurate sensationalism protect killers not victims.”

Dr Jane Monckton-Smith, author of “Murder, Gender and The Media: Narratives of Dangerous Love” and Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Gloucestershire

¹ Office for National Statistics, 2016.

² Stark, E (2007), Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life, UK: Oxford University Press.

³ Monckton-Smith, Jane (2012), Murder, Gender and the Media: Narratives of Dangerous Love, UK: Palgrave MacMillan

⁴ Burton, M. (2008), Legal Responses to Domestic Violence. Oxford: Routledge Cavendish.

WHY GUIDELINES ARE IMPORTANT

“Newspapers quoted locals who described our father as ‘a nice guy’ and reported that he was ‘a DIY nut’. Others even dared to describe him as ‘always caring’. Alongside this, one writer claimed that the murder of our mother and sister was ‘understandable’. In every report, there was speculation that the prospect of divorce ‘drove’ our father to murder. Throughout, there was little mention or description of our mother or sister.”

Luke and Ryan Hart (whose mother and sister were murdered by their father, and who have authored Operation Lighthouse, which tells their story of coercive control and domestic homicide)

“The trauma domestic homicide inflicts on families is sometimes compounded by misleading media narratives. Although often accurately reporting the frenzied nature of many of these killings, they frequently ignore or underplay the long lead up of abuse of the victim and the element of detailed planning beforehand. The world then believes the homicide came out of the blue. As one sister bereaved by domestic homicide said:

“After having read certain reports, I imagined my sister shouting ‘No, no, that’s not how it was. You need to get this right.”

Frank Mullane (brother of Julia Pemberton, who was murdered by her partner and who founded Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse).

“Women killed by their partners do not have dignified deaths, the least they should be afforded is dignity after death. We also owe this to their children and relatives - grief can be compounded by careless media reporting.”

Liz Kelly CBE, Professor and Director of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University

“In the midst of rolling news, it can sometimes feel that there is only a small window that reporters have to ensure a story is accurate and fair. But under that time pressure, dignity for those who affected by tragedy should be at the forefront for any journalist. Practical guidelines for domestic abuse are as crucial as those for suicide and mental health reporting. So is listening. Especially to families who have lived through trauma, and people belonging to minority communities that come with its own nuance and language to abuse.”

Megha Mohan, global gender reporter

“When a woman is killed under the guise of ‘honour killings’, there is a tendency to report on Islam instead of her death. Insensitivity in reporting can elude to her religion being the driving force, whereas in reality, it’s based around cultural and patriarchal values. Honour killings happen outside of Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures.”

Sharan Dhaliwal, Editor of Burnt Roti magazine

“Much like there are guidelines for covering stories about suicide, journalists should be required to follow guidelines on how to report on domestic violence. Media coverage has the power to shape the public’s understanding of domestic violence. As it stands, we are failing the victims of that violence.”

Rossalyn Warren, Freelance journalist

⁵ Mullane in Domestic Abuse, Homicide and Gender: Strategies for Policy and Practice, 2014.

BEST PRACTICE REPORTING TIPS

01

Accountability: Place the responsibility on the killer.

- a) Refrain from describing the murder as an uncharacteristic event, and look deeper into the character of the relationship. Men kill because they want to reassert their control, not because they've "lost control". Fatal domestic abuse is usually underpinned by a longstanding sense of ownership, coercive control and possessive behaviours.
- b) Avoid including speculative "reasons" or "triggers" for a man killing a woman that oversimplify the case. Particularly avoid using sympathetic cliches such as "jilted lover" or framing the killing in the context of an "affair"; these are proven to lead to lighter sentencing.
- c) Consider the sources included in the piece. Try not to build a piece solely from a defendant's claims in court; the deceased partner is unable to verify these.

02

Accuracy: Name the crime as domestic abuse or violence

As opposed to just 'tragedy' or 'horror'. Frame the death in the context of a pattern of controlling behaviour. Where possible, include examples of a history of coercive control and previous assaults. Find out whether police were aware of the abuse and if they responded.

Reach out to experts for comment, not just the police. Include a reference to helplines at the end of the article, so readers know where to seek help:

- In the UK, the national domestic violence helpline is 0808 2000 247.
- In Scotland, the domestic abuse and forced marriage helpline is 0800 027 1234.
- In Wales, the Live Fear Free helpline is 0808 8010 800.
- In Northern Ireland, the domestic and sexual violence helpline is 0808 802 1414.

If you or your family have lost a friend or family member through fatal domestic abuse, AAFDA can offer specialist and expert support and advocacy.

- For info visit www.aafda.org.uk

03

Images.

Centre the image of the deceased woman, but include a picture of the perpetrator at the bottom. If she is a Muslim woman, use the image that has been provided by the family and police alone.

04

Dignity: Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details that compromise the dignity of the deceased woman or her surviving children and family members.

Journalists have an ethical responsibility for family members, especially children who survive their mother's death. In cases of BME women, focus on the perpetrator's gender-based abuse and control as the root cause of homicide. When religion or culture is used as a reason, it detracts from the sexist values the killer holds that underpin their violent actions.

05

Equality: Avoid insensitive or trivialising language or images.

All women have a right to dignity and respect, especially in death, regardless of their race, sexuality, occupation, class and whether they live with mental or physical disabilities. Remember a victim's children are likely to read reports on their mother's death.

06

Sensitivity to cultures and religion

When reporting on a woman's death, there is no need to discuss religious or cultural values, or her religious or cultural background unless imperative to a case. Be careful not to perpetuate stereotypes or make assumptions, particularly around 'honour killing' or domestic homicide.



EXAMPLE OF WHAT NOT TO DO

1

Avoid clichés like “jilted lover” that reinforce a romantic narrative. This is proven to lead to sympathy and lighter sentencing for killers.

2

Avoid speculative reasons or sensationalised “triggers” for a murder that are based on a woman’s behaviour. This is oversimplifying and misrepresenting the full context. A woman’s dignity is the highest priority

3

Consider what resources or specialist voices you need to seek out in order to cover this piece sensitively. They are out there and will enhance the quality and accuracy of your writing. This especially relates to white journalists covering deaths in BAME communities.

5

Don’t perpetuate myths like “jealous rages” or “loss of control”. Almost all domestic violence deaths are planned by highly controlling partners or ex-partners. Dig deeper into the context and character of the relationship, the coercive control present in the relationship, and any prior engagement that the killer had with the police.

7

In the first stages of a case, quoting a neighbour who did not know the context of the relationship, is inappropriate and risks damaging the family’s bereavement as well as legal proceedings.

9

Don’t leave images of the woman at the bottom of the article: centre her and honour her death. If she is a Muslim woman, use the image provided by the police. Do not trawl her personal Facebook to try and find a photo of her without her headscarf.

10

Don’t use the passive voice in regard to fatal violence. This should read “Joe Bloggs slapped and choked Sara to death”

4

Avoid building a piece solely from defence claims in court. This presents an unbalanced and biased version of events that the dead victim is unable to verify or respond to.

6

Be cautious of claims around “affairs”. Women are at highest risk of homicide after they have separated from an abusive partner - and abusive partners believe only they have the power to end the relationship. A killer’s claims of an “affair” may well be fictional - or his distorted perception of a woman’s new relationship and life without him. (See appendix 3 for more)

8

Don’t centre images of the killer, or grant too much space to his claims. Focus on the victim who has lost her life. If picturing the killer, include a behavioural description about his controlling nature.

Daily News

1 **JILTED HUBBY GUILTY OF MURDERING CHEATING WIFE** 2

3 By: *Journalist who hasn't read these guidelines*

4 **A desperate husband faces prison for murdering his wife over an alleged affair.**

5 Accountant Joe Bloggs claims to have flown into a jealous rage when he discovered his wife had taken a new lover.

8 **Killer:** Bloggs claimed his wife had taken a new lover.

6 Giving evidence, the killer said **“I loved her so much, I just had to kill her.** She was cheating on me and said she would never love me again. Then I don’t remember what happened, I lost control.”

7 **A neighbour described him as a “helpful, friendly man.”**

9 **Victim:** Sara was choked and slapped to death. 10

CASE TIMELINE AND CHECKLIST

STAGE	WHAT SHOULD JOURNALISTS BE MINDFUL OF?
Immediate aftermath	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try not to let the urgency of reporting a breaking news story overshadow accuracy.• If you want a quote from family members, go via the relevant FLO (police Family Liaison Officer).• Your article is a public record of someone's life. Their children and families will be reading this coverage and you may re-traumatise them with hasty or inaccurate reporting. For you it's an article, for them it has deep emotional impact.• If you can't speak to a family member, don't use a quote from a neighbour who may be unfamiliar with the reality of the perpetrator's character or their relationship with the victim. This may negatively impact the justice process.• Fatal domestic abuse is a national rather than personal problem. If few details are known, quote the "2 women a week are murdered by a partner or ex-partner" statistic to contextualise the death.
Perpetrator charged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Centre dignified images of the victim(s) instead of the perpetrator.• Without making the perpetrator the focus, don't shy away from publishing his photograph in the interest of public health and safety.
Case open in court	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you reporting a balance of prosecution and defence?• Are you including context about the relationship's history, or only reporting on the fatal attack?• Is your reporting sensitive? Are you mindful of its impact upon the victim's family?

STAGE

WHAT SHOULD JOURNALISTS BE MINDFUL OF?

Conviction

- Have you named it as fatal domestic abuse or fatal domestic violence?
 - Have you included the full context or are you oversimplifying to make it look like one trigger caused the fatal violence e.g. an “affair”?
 - Have you put the national domestic violence helpline footer?
 - Are you describing the perpetrator’s actions in an active voice rather than passive? Hold them responsible.
 - E.g. “A man killed a woman” instead of “A woman was killed”
-

Life after

- Have you added the national domestic violence helpline footer?
- Have you consulted expert opinion and national statistics on domestic abuse to best inform your piece?

BEFORE YOU FILE....

1. Have you gone through these guidelines and checklist?
2. Have you included the full context, rather than oversimplifying the story so it appears one thing caused the death?
3. Have you named the crime as fatal domestic abuse and added the correct helpline at the bottom?
4. Have you checked with local women’s groups or specialist domestic abuse services to make sure you’re getting nuance right?

RESOURCES & KEY CONTACTS FOR JOURNALISTS

AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)

Research, policy, consultancy and training on violence against women in the UK.

Website: avaproject.org.uk

AAFDA (Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse)

Specialist and expert support and advocacy for friends and family members of domestic homicide victims, assisting with Domestic Homicide Reviews and Inquests.

Website: aafda.org.uk

Halo Project

A national organisation supporting victims of honour-based violence, forced marriages and FGM

Website: haloproject.org.uk

Refuge

Providing specialist support to women, children and some men escaping domestic violence and other forms of violence.

Website: refuge.org.uk

Imkaan

UK-based, Black feminist organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and 'Minority Ethnic' women and girls.

Website: imkaan.org.uk

Standing Together

National organisation improving the way local services respond to domestic violence via Coordinated Community Response, and specialising in domestic homicide reviews.

Website: standingtogether.org.uk

London Black Women's Project

A women-only black feminist organisation to serve the needs of black minority ethnic and refugee women

Website: thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk

Women's Aid

Providing life-saving support services and refuges across the UK

Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Website: nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

SafeLives

National charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse through research, policy and training.

Website: safelives.org.uk

Royalty-free images

Photographer Laura Dodsworth, commissioned by Scottish Women's Aid and Zero Tolerance, has produced a collection of royalty-free images for journalists to use for general articles on domestic violence [here](#).

HELPLINES

Domestic and Sexual Violence Helpline (Northern Ireland)

24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline is open to anyone affected by domestic violence regardless of gender, sexuality, disability, age or ethnicity.

Helpline: 0808 802 1414

Website: avaproject.org.uk

National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans* (LGBT) Domestic Violence Helpline

The National LGBT Helpline is run by Galop, who have been working for 33 years to support LGBT victims of abuse, violence and discrimination through a variety of services

Helpline: 0300 999 5428

Website: galop.org.uk

Karma Nirvana

Supporting victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage.

Helpline: 0800 5999 247

Website: karmanirvana.org.uk

Live Fear Free (Wales)

A Welsh Government Helpline, providing information and advice for those suffering with domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women

Helpline: 0808 8010 800

Website: livefearfree.gov.wales

Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline

24-hour helpline providing information and support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or forced marriage.

Helpline: 0808 802 1414

Website: sdafmh.org.uk

National Domestic Violence Helpline

24-hour freephone providing information and support for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, their friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Website: nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

Men's Advice Line

Advice and support for men in abusive relationships.

Helpline: 0808 802 1414

APPENDIX 1: WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

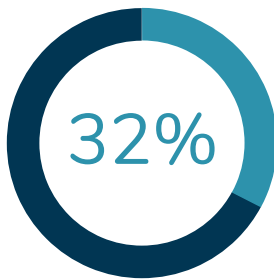
Domestic abuse (also known as domestic violence) is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.

It is very common in the UK and in the vast majority of cases it is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men.

Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to:

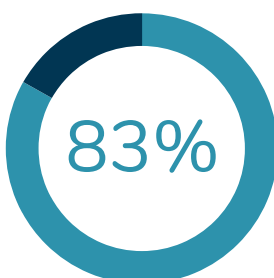
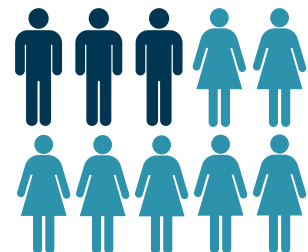
- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse (including homicide)
- Financial abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse

FACTS ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



Domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by the police account for 32% of violent crimes (ONS, 2017)

Women experience higher rates of repeat victimisation and are much more likely to be seriously hurt (Walby & Towers, 2017) or killed than male victims of domestic abuse (ONS, 2017).



83% of high frequency victims (more than 10 crimes) are women. (From a study of data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, a nationally representative household survey by Walby & Towers, 2018)

APPENDIX 2: WHAT IS FATAL DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Fatal domestic abuse or domestic homicide includes any homicide where the relationship between an adult victim (aged 16 and over) and the perpetrator falls into one of the following categories:

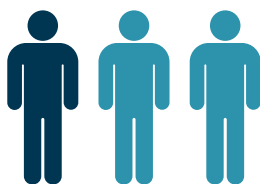
- Spouse
- common-law spouse
- cohabiting partner
- boyfriend or girlfriend
- ex-spouse, ex-cohabiting partner or ex-boyfriend or girlfriend
- extramarital relationship
- lover's spouse
- emotional rival
- son or daughter (including step and adopted relationships)
- parent (including step and adopted relationships)
- brother or sister
- other relatives

FACTS ABOUT FATAL DOMESTIC ABUSE



Every week, two women are murdered by a partner or ex-partner (ONS 2017.)

A history of coercive control is argued to be always present (Stark, 2007).



2 in 3 male victims of domestic homicide were killed by another male (ONS, 2017)

49%

Nearly half

of women murdered by their partner or ex-partner are killed less than a month after separation.

72%

of intimate partner homicides

the perpetrator had a history of violence.

79%

of women are killed

within six months of separation

90%

of women are killed

within a year of separation (ONS, 2017)

APPENDIX 3: WHY DO MEN MURDER THEIR PARTNERS AND EX-PARTNERS?

Evidence from the Murder in Britain Study (Dobash & Dobash) Sept, 2018 ⁶

Rebecca & Russell Dobash, Emeritus professors, Criminology, School of Law, U.Manchester.

'Murder in Britain' is a ten-year study based on people serving life sentences for murder in British prisons. It is the biggest ever study of men who kill their partners and ex partners.

They found that:

- **Jealousy, possessiveness, and a woman's attempts to leave** a relationship are significant features of domestic homicides.
- **When separation occurs, the man's issues of possessiveness and jealousy are elevated.** This includes not just the act of separation itself but also the process of terminating the relationship and threats to leave.
- When men could not force a woman partner to stay, they 'changed the project' from trying to 'keep her' to one of deciding to **'destroy her'** for leaving. At this point, the men became more focused on killing her.
- Attempts to separate from such men are fraught with coercion, threats of physical violence, threats of sexual violence, and threats of murder.
- **59% of the men had previously used physical violence against the woman partner that they eventually murder.** This violence was often repeated and severe. In many cases, it had been reported to the police or social services prior to the murder.
- About one-third of the men had a **previous conviction for assault of some type**, not necessarily against the victim of the murder, but in over half of these convictions for assault the usual victim was a woman. These men specialized in using violence against women.
- For men with no history of previous convictions and whose lives were more "conventional" in terms of demographic factors such as education or employment, the **murder may initially seem to come from "nowhere," but a closer look may tell another story.** Despite appearances to the contrary, 46% of the men with no previous conviction had actually been violent to the woman at some time prior to killing her, although, for a variety of reasons, this had gone completely undetected or, if known, had never resulted in a conviction.

⁶Dobash, Rebecca & Russell Dobash, (2015), When Men Murder Women, New York: Oxford University Press.

- In some cases, the lack of a previous conviction may be related to the fact that the man was gainfully employed and/or was deemed to be a person in good standing in the community
 - The casefiles were filled with **men's expressions of negative notions about women** and especially about women partners who were either explicitly or implicitly deemed to be **subordinate** to them, expected to provide them with domestic services, and required to remain in residence with them and faithful to them as long as the men so desired.
 - Jealous men imagined that their woman partner was seeing another man or being unfaithful every time she left the house, whether she was going shopping or visiting other women, including mothers, sisters, women neighbors or friends. They were suspicious even in circumstances where contact with another man was extremely unlikely. The reality of the woman's actions, movements, and contacts may have little effect on the man's imaginations about them.
-

APPENDIX 4: GLOSSARY

Coercive control: A pattern of controlling behaviour which seeks to take away the victim's liberty or freedom, to strip away their sense of self. This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Domestic abuse: Can be used interchangeably with domestic violence. Domestic abuse is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.

Domestic violence: See above.

Domestic homicide: See page 16

Domestic Homicide Review (DHR): A multi-agency review of the circumstances in which the death of a person aged 16 or over has, or appears to have, resulted from violence, abuse or neglect by a person to whom they were related or with whom they were, or had been, in an intimate personal relationship, or a member of the same household as themselves.

Police Family Liaison Officer (FLO): A police officer who is assigned to a bereaved family as a point of contact between them and the police during an investigation. They will give statements to the media if the family does not wish to.

Honour killing: The homicide of a family member due to the perpetrator's belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonour to the family. This can be construed as shame brought from divorce, preferred sexualities, committing adultery, sex outside of marriage, renouncing faith, being a victim of rape or dressing inappropriately.

The murder may initially seem to come from “nowhere,” but a closer look may tell another story.

